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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000849

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/09/28
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EC](#)
SUBJECT: INDIGENOUS PROTESTS FIZZLE IN ECUADOR

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EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Confederation of Indigenous People of Ecuador (CONAIE) called for a strike and road closures beginning September 27 in protest of the Government of Ecuador's proposed Law on Water and other laws, old and new, dealing with natural resources. The protests were supposed to begin at midnight, and run "indefinitely." The teacher's union (UNE), already protesting the Law on Higher Education, had promised to support the indigenous groups. The GOE's ministers and police officials are out in force stating that they will not permit road closures or the interruption of public services, both of which are prohibited under the constitution. Although some roads were closed temporarily, the majority of the country remains unaffected by either group's activities. There are no reports of violent confrontations between the indigenous groups and the police. President Rafael Correa has already declared CONAIE's attempted mobilization "a complete failure," and the protests appear to be fizzling out. End Summary.

¶2. (U) CONAIE, the largest umbrella organization representing Ecuador's indigenous community, called for nation-wide protests and road blockages to begin at midnight, September 27, to oppose the GOE's proposal on the Law on Water, which is currently being debated in the National Assembly. However, other organizations that represent indigenous groups decided not to take part in the strikes. CONAIE supporters were able to block some roads temporarily on the night of September 27-28, but police have since cleared the highways and traffic is running unimpeded in most of the nation. The roads from the eastern provinces and commercial centers in Guayaquil to the Sierra remained clear. The Panamerican highway heading south from Quito was cleared by 9am. Some roads from the southern province of Canar into the city of Cuenca were temporarily blocked, so buses had to find alternate routes, but traffic on those roads is now unimpeded. As of 3pm on September 28, the only road that remained closed intermittently was the Panamerican Highway north of Quito, along the border between Pichincha and Imbabura provinces, near the town of Cajas. One TV report said that it was possible that as many as 10,000 protesters were near Cajas, but the information remains unconfirmed.

¶3. (U) According to news reports and the Ecuadorian National Police, the authorities have been able to move the small barricades with little opposition. As the police move in, the demonstrators move out. In a few places, the demonstrators have tried to re-barricade roads after they have been re-opened, only to have the police return to clear the streets. There are no reports of violent confrontations between the authorities and the protestors at this time. CONAIE is reportedly saying that its supporters come from remote areas and have not yet been able to travel to the protest sites, and that more protesters will be in place in the coming days. Meanwhile, UNE, the teachers union, is reporting that its members will join CONAIE's activities in the coming days.

¶4. (C) CONAIE claims that the proposed Water Law would allow for the "privatization" of water, while the indigenous communities are demanding assurances that water resources will belong only to the community and the people. An American engineer who has long worked in Ecuador on potable water projects in poor areas told us the central government had no idea of the back-breaking toil that goes into constructing potable water projects and the deep commitment of local indigenous communities to managing them. He faulted the government for failure to provide an opportunity for dialogue on the issue.

¶5. (SBU) President Correa, his ministers, and the drafters of the proposed Law flatly deny that there is any way water resources would fall into private hands under the proposed legislation. In a television interview on September 28, Minister of Government and Police Gustavo Jalkh said the constitution clearly states that water is a human right, and cannot fall into private hands. The new Law, said Jalkh, would of course be in line with the constitution. CONAIE, meanwhile, says the GOE won't enter into dialogue (they demand to speak with Correa, not with intermediaries) and is also unhappy with other proposed laws that cover natural resources.

¶6. (U) Meanwhile, the GOE is consistent in all statements regarding all protests: laws permit peaceful protests, but forbid road closures or the interruption of public services. Jalkh told TV stations this morning during a round of interviews that "they have the right to protest, but cannot infringe on the rights of others to go to school and get to work." Police are acting accordingly and attempting to clear the roads as soon as they can get to the barricades.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) CONAIE is reportedly not as strong organizationally as it was 10 years ago, when similar mobilizations paralyzed the country. Lacking the support of other indigenous organizations, who are calling for dialogue with the government, it does not seem to be able to generate the enthusiasm among the base that would put tens of thousands of supporters behind barricades on the highways. The National Director of the Federation of Evangelical Indigenous People of Ecuador (FEINE), for example, told Poloff on September 25 that his organization wanted to work with the National Assembly and GOE to refine the law, and saw no reason to join CONAIE's protest at this time. Some commentators are saying that this effort is a true test of CONAIE's strength; a decided failure will show that the organization is weak and unable to influence the GOE politically, while a success against Correa's government could rejuvenate the organization. At the moment, it appears that CONAIE is not able to mobilize enough support to achieve its goals. Meanwhile, the government is standing fast in pointing out what it sees as CONAIE's failure to read the law, and the need to keep the roads clear.

CHRITTON